THE AMERICAS AS REVEALED IN THE ENCYCLOPÉDIE

BY

BEULAH H. SWIGART
A.B., University of Illinois, 1924
A.M., University of Illinois, 1928

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES IN THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS, 1939

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BEULAH H. SWIGART

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The primary purpose of this work is to present a picture of the Americas as they are revealed in the *Encyclopédie* of Denis Diderot and his collaborators, the writer being of the opinion that, because of the great variety of sources drawn upon by the encyclopedists, one may thus discover the New World as it was imagined by all Europe in the eighteenth century.

In the pursuit of this study, however, there evolved two secondary interests: first, a curiosity concerning the sources of information on America considered of sufficient authenticity to warrant their use in the *Encyclopédie;* and second, a desire to discover who were the contributors of articles on America, and what were their reactions to material which they, as editors, were willing to accept.

An attempt to satisfy the curiosity of the writer in regard to the first interest has been made in the compilation of sources which forms the Supplement, or Part I, of the bibliography of this study; and, also, in the chapter entitled "Reliability of Sources" (pages 278-294). As for the second interest, an account of the editors who contributed information on America is presented briefly in the introduction, while the illuminating comments found at the ends of many of their articles in the *Encyclopédie,* and incorporated into this study, reveal not only their personal reactions, but also the increasingly critical mind of the eighteenth century.

In making this study the writer has examined carefully the thirty-six volumes (approximately 36,000 pages) of the Geneva edition of 1777, and made note of all references—even the most trivial—to the Americas and their adjacent islands. Although an attempt has been made to use all these references, it was found necessary to exclude detailed botanical or other scientific descriptions, in order to prevent the result from resembling the pages of a naturalist's notebook.

Examination of the remaining 646 articles resulted in the following interesting discoveries:

(1) The encyclopedists presented to the public a vast amount of romantic and incredible information concerning the Americas.

(2) The mere existence of the thirteen English colonies was almost overlooked; in fact, the *Encyclopédie* offers a surprisingly small amount of information on the North American continent.

(3) There is a superabundance of information about the West Indies and Brazil.

(4) Natural history comprises the greater part of the information about the Americas.

(5) There are very few references to government in the Americas, in spite of the belief that reports of the existence of "perfect states of freedom" in America had a part in increasing the political unrest preceding the Revolution.

The most surprising discovery concerns the scarcity of information on the thirteen English colonies in North America. The probable explanation of this neglect lies in the avowed scientific purpose of the *Encyclopédie.* In North America, the scattered English colonists, preoccupied with problems of conscience, and absorbed in a struggle for existence, had little time to devote to the advancement of science—with the notable exception of Benjamin Franklin, to whom the *Encyclopédie* does complete justice. Then, too, reports arriving in Europe from the English colonies were not such as to attract attention toward the North. New England offered no promise of sudden wealth. The records kept by colonial governors and Puritan preachers told of severe weather, Indian raids, and pioneer hardships rather than of lives of luxury and ease. In fact, North America lacked the exotic appeal and the romantic glamor possessed to such a degree by its southern neighbor.

On the contrary, reports by travelers, of the luxuriance of nature in South America, stimulated in natural historians and geographers the desire to see these things for themselves. Thus, rumors of strange animals, sea monsters, huge serpents, life-giving herbs, gigantic mountains, great storms, rivers as broad as seas, not to mention tales of pygmies and giants, war-like Amazons, and the strange civilizations in Mexico and Peru—all drew to the South the attention of the scientists in Europe. Then, too, most of the French settlements were around the Caribbean Sea, in the West Indies, in Louisiana, or on the north

and east coasts of South America. There were to be found the French naturalists and missionaries, whose records, like those of Père du Tertre, both missionary and naturalist of Santo Domingo, were so readily available to Diderot and his co-editors.

In regard to natural history, the predominance of such information—both true and false—may have been the result of several contributing factors. The first is the above-mentioned scientific purpose of the *Encyclopédie.* Also, eighteenth-century France was science-conscious. The time was ripe for the natural historian. Inspired by discoveries, many new and excellent works, among them the works of Buffon, Ray, Marcgraf, and Willoughby, had stimulated interest and afforded abundant information on natural history. The utilitarian spirit of the times caused the discovery of anything new in natural resources to be considered of immense importance, while the interest of the chief editor, Diderot, in occupations and trades drew his attention to natural history as the source of the materials of industry. Moreover, in the West Indies and the northern half of Brazil the warm, moist, tropical climate had produced not only the most luxuriant, varied, and strange vegetation, but also the most abundant animal life to be found anywhere in the New World. Here was an unexplored paradise for the natural historian, and a no less fertile field of information for eighteenth-century encyclopedists intent upon disseminating scientific knowledge throughout the world.

In gathering this information about the Americas as presented in the *Encyclopédie,* the writer was favorably impressed by the vividness of the picture produced, an effect which is the result of the encyclopedists using, so far as possible, only the first-hand information of eyewitnesses. In an effort to keep some of the original freshness of style the writer has used many direct quotations, usually in French, with the original spelling preserved.

Before concluding, it should be remarked that there have already been made several excellent studies with interesting relationships to the work undertaken here. However, it is the belief of the writer that such former studies have been based upon exotic voyages not only to the Americas but also to many strange lands, or that they have been concerned primarily with a consideration of the influence of journeys on the development of certain philosophic ideas in Europe.

Among related works based upon a study of voyages is that of Gustave Lanson, who, as an aid to discovering the origin of the philosophic thought of the latter part of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century, did extensive research upon numerous old relations of voyages to unusual places, including America. One result of this study was the appearance of his "L'origine et le développement de l'esprit philosophique" in the *Revue des cours et conférences* (1907-1909).

This work was followed by a study,[1] begun in 1916, by Geoffroy Atkinson, in which he sought, through an examination of more than one hundred "voyages," to discover the relationship between the many voyages appearing in the seventeenth century and the spirit of the eighteenth century.

Another somewhat similar study[2] is the very excellent work of Gilbert Chinard, who traces the influence of America on the development of European interest in exotic literature.

In contrast to the above-mentioned works, the present study is limited to an objective presentation only of the Americas, and only as they are revealed in the *Encyclopédie,* which has served as a storehouse for reports made by the hundreds of travelers and scientists in America during a period of two hundred and fifty years.

The writer believes that all these various and conflicting views on the subject of the Americas are here gathered together and presented as a whole for the first time. She has tried to portray faithfully eighteenth-century conceptions of the geography of the New World, descriptions of tropical luxuriance, of strange plants and animals, as well as pictures of Indian customs, and tales of giants and other monstrosities. Some of the struggles of the early colonies are also recounted, with a description of their commerce and rivalry, and an account of piracy on the Spanish main. The encyclopedists themselves have added interesting predictions for the future of America.

In fact, these personal comments of Diderot and his co-editors are illuminating. It is hoped that those quoted may not only add zest to some necessarily commonplace information, but also permit glimpses into some of the prevailing scientific and religious conceptions in eighteenth-century skeptical philosophy.

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[1]Geoffroy Atkinson, *Relations de voyages et l'évolution des idées,* Paris, 1924.
[2]Gilbert Chinard, *L'Amérique et le rêve exotique,* Paris, 1913.

Finally, a comprehensive view of the hundreds of items drawn from the pages of the *Encyclopédie* or *Dictionnaire raisonée des sciences, des arts et des métiers* reveals that a romantic conception of America still prevailed, at least in the popular mind, in the eighteenth century. It also shows that this attitude was gradually changing, due to the efforts of the scientists who had gone to the New World to ascertain if the earlier extravagant accounts of the adventurers were true.

VITA

I was born near Farmer City, Illinois, May 6, 1898, and was graduated from the Moore Township High School at Farmer City in 1916. During the summer of 1917 I attended Illinois State Normal University at Normal. In June, 1920, I registered at the University of Illinois, from which I was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1924, and, in 1928, with the degree of Master of Arts, with Romance Languages as my major field.

My teaching experience has included positions in the rural, elementary, and high schools of Pennsylvania and Illinois, as well as eleven years in my present position as teacher of Spanish in the Champaign (Illinois) Senior High School.